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ABSTRACT

Flexible work schedules are one response to changes in the composition of the work force, new life-styles, and changes in work attitudes. Types of alternative work schedules are part-time and temporary employment, job sharing, and flextime. Part-time workers are a diverse group--women, the very young, and older near-retirees. Although part-time jobs are disproportionately lower-wage jobs, a growing number of part-time jobs are in managerial and professional positions. Part-time workers often have extensive commitments to activities and responsibilities outside of work, such as child and elder care, which makes part-time work an appealing option. Temporary workers are a fast-growing segment of the labor force. Temporary jobs provide scheduling freedom and variety for workers, and businesses often use contingent workers for cost containment and staffing flexibility. One response to a shortage of permanent, career-status part-time jobs is job sharing, typically an arrangement in which two people share one full-time job. Successful job sharing depends on the commitment of job partners and willingness of supervisors to be flexible. Flextime schedules allow variability in the starting and ending times of the work day. Flexible working hours can result in higher motivation and job satisfaction. A diverse work force and potential labor shortages imply that an array of scheduling options should be offered. Greater demand for alternative work schedules will require changes in the practices and attitudes of employers and employees, such as rethinking organizational structures and task assignments, altering supervisory styles, conceiving new methods of performance appraisal, and preparing flexible, self-directed workers. (SK)

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

FLEXIBLE WORK SCHEDULES

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Organizations need flexibility to respond to change. The essence of this flexibility is the ability to match labor needs with the existing labor supply, maintaining a balance between the well-being of the organization and that of employees. Flexible work schedules are one response to changes in the composition of the work force, new life-styles such as single-parent and two-paycheck households, and changes in the way people perceive work and time. This **ERIC Digest** examines some options for flexibility in work schedules, presenting advantages and disadvantages of various types for employers and employees and their implications for training, career development, and policy.

Dimensions of Alternative Work Schedules

Alternative schedules can be categorized by the amount of time spent working, the time of day when work is scheduled, and the amount of employee control (Staines 1989). Chief variations in the amount of time are part-time employment, including phased retirement; temporary employment; and job sharing. Variations in the time of day include flextime, flexiplace (commonly, working at home), and the compressed work week.

Part-Time Employment

In 1987, about 19.5 million workers (17 percent of the work force) were part time, working fewer than 35 hours per week (*Alternative Work Schedules* 1988). These workers are primarily women, the very young, and older near-retirees--a diverse group with very different concerns. Large numbers of part-time jobs are in retail and service occupations. Belying old notions about productivity, perceived lack of commitment, and working for "pin money," part-timers are demanding pay equity, benefits, more responsibility, and greater fulfillment. A significant number are managerial and professional workers, giving rise to the concept of career part-time employment.

Advantages of part-time work to parents and students include more time for family life or education, better child care arrangements, and off-peak commuting. Older workers can use reduced hours as a means of gradual transition to retirement. These advantages often come at the cost of lower pay, benefits, and pension; reduced career advancement; and increased vulnerability to layoffs. Employers may benefit from increased productivity, reduced absences and lateness, easier recruitment, and lower labor costs. However, they may also face opposition from unions, higher training costs, and greater administrative or supervisory workload.

Although part-time jobs are disproportionately lower-wage jobs, part-timers in professional-managerial occupations appear to be at least as well paid as full-time workers. "The growing number of skilled women seeking part-time work during child-rearing years may lead to growing numbers of professional part-time jobs" (Blank 1989, p. 26). Because many part-time workers have extensive commitments to activities and responsibilities outside of work, and because many are in households with full-time earners, part-time work is an optimal choice for some people.

Temporary Employment

A fast-growing segment of the labor force is temporary or contingent workers. Temporaries are found in a wider range of industries and occupations than ever before, and the numbers of contracting (consultants, free-lancers) and leasing arrangements are increasing, providing many opportunities for work at home. Two-thirds of the contingent work force are female, and two of five temporaries work part time (Hartmann and Lapidus 1989).

For workers, temporary jobs provide scheduling freedom and variety. They may suit those caring for children or parents, retirees, people who want supplemental income but not permanent work, and those seeking permanent jobs, such as recent graduates, reentry workers, and people between jobs or relocating. Businesses use contingent workers for cost containment and staffing flexibility, without the personnel costs and administrative details, which are handled by the temporary agency. Office automation and equipment upgrading create a constant demand for sophisticated skills; using temporaries can involve less investment in training.

The most obvious problems for workers are lack of benefits, pensions, and advancement opportunities and potential difficulty with getting permanent employment. Employers' concerns are lack of employee loyalty and quality control. There is also concern that temporary jobs are displacing permanent jobs, encouraging the growth of a two-tier work force in which core employees have security, benefits, pensions, and stable income and peripheral employees have none. Particularly because females, young people, and minorities predominate in the temporary work force, this trend may further limit their access to training opportunities and higher-paying jobs with benefits (**Flexible Workstyles** 1988).

Job Sharing

One response to the shortage of permanent, career-status part-time jobs is job sharing, typically an arrangement in which two people share one full-time job. In some cases, partners arrange to share the same job and their child care responsibilities. The success of job sharing depends on finding compatible, cooperative partners and on careful coordination between partners and with supervisors. Promoted as a way to prevent burnout, spread dull or routine tasks, balance work and non-work responsibilities, or ease into retirement, job sharing is associated with improved morale and lower overtime, turnover, and absenteeism. It may give employers access to a larger

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applicant pool, a wider range of expertise and creativity, and better coverage.

On the other hand, job sharers may be faced with lower income, fewer fringe benefits, and slower advancement and tenure. There may be sensitivity to sharing credit for accomplishments, as well as negative attitudes of full-time workers. Supervisors may have to contend with difficulty in personnel evaluations, communication, coordination, scheduling, and determination of pay and benefit levels.

The literature contains little research on job sharing's effectiveness but many case studies of successful partnerships (*Alternative Work Schedules* 1988). To a great extent, successful job sharing depends on the initiative of individuals who manage to convince their employers of its advantages. However, in the last decade, 25 states and the federal government have officially encouraged its use through legislation or support of pilot projects.

Flextime

Approximately 20 percent of part-time and 12.3 percent of full-time employees have the option of flextime. Flextime schedules allow variability in the starting and ending times of the work day, usually with a core time during which all employees must be present and flexible time when employees may choose times of arrival and departure. Flexibility is also enhanced if employees can vary schedules daily rather than with prior notice. Another variation is the compressed work week, usually four 10-hour days.

Unlike other options, flextime offers the most benefits to employees with the fewest costs (Staines 1989). Higher motivation and job satisfaction have been shown to result from greater control over one's time. Commuting time is often lessened. Productivity may be enhanced by a schedule that takes advantage of an individual's biological clock, although mixed evidence of productivity gains has been found (Buckley, Kicza, and Crane 1987). Employers benefit from reduced absences and lateness, lower turnover, higher morale, less overtime pay, and better use of facilities.

One of the greatest barriers to flextime is the reluctance of supervisors who may anticipate inadequate staffing and difficulties with communication, meetings, scheduling, supervision, and timekeeping. Because certain types of work are not suited to flextime, inequities may result if it is offered only to certain departments or classes of workers. Union opposition arises from the loss of overtime rights; labor legislation regarding overtime hours may constrain certain scheduling arrangements.

Implications of Flexible Schedules

Greater demand for alternative work schedules will require changes in the practices and attitudes of employers and employees and therefore in education and training to prepare people for the workplace. Opportunities for educators and researchers will arise in career development, advocacy, and research.

A diverse work force with diverse needs, as well as potential labor shortages, imply that an array of options should be offered to the extent possible. Recognition that life patterns are no longer linear (education-work-retirement) but cyclical (alternating periods of education, work, retraining, and family responsibilities) means that all workers could benefit from a cafeteria approach to scheduling arrangements, including family leave, preprimary and after-school programs, and the options discussed here. Flexible fringe benefit plans would reduce some of the disadvantages of part-time work.

Many of these options require rethinking organizational structures and task assignments. Moreover, a change in supervisory styles is needed, from negative/controlling/monitoring to positive/facilitating/participatory. Supervisors need to be trained to cope with these new approaches. Management information systems may help ease the burdens of administration and scheduling. New methods of performance appraisal are needed.

The new flexible worker must be prepared to cope with alternative work styles. Career development programs should focus on--

- Interpersonal communication skills
- Organizing, planning, and time management skills
- Independence and self-direction
- Assessment of work values (time versus money, reevaluation of the criteria of success)
- Allocation of wage earning and household responsibilities
- Realistic expectations of flexible programs

Employment policies regarding job creation and the use of contingent workers should be examined to ensure that short-term solutions do not become long-term patterns. Solutions to the affordability, availability, and quality of child care must be found. Ways to alter the time rigidity of other institutions (schools, child care providers, doctors, dentists) that have an impact on daily life scheduling should be investigated. Present work arrangements have perhaps been determined more by custom and tradition than necessity. For a new century, it is time to find new ways to work.

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